Re-examining Dalit Feminism in the Writings of Yashica Dutt, Sujatha Gidla and Bama

A

Synopsis

submitted for registration in

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

(Faculty of Humanities)

Ranchi University, Ranchi

Prepared under the supervision of:
Dr. Afrinul Haque Khan
Assistant Professor& Head,
Department of English,
Nirmala College,
Ranchi University, Ranchi.

Submitted by:
Mamta Kumari
Research Scholar,
University Department of English,
Ranchi University,
Ranchi.

Ranchi University, Ranchi

2025

Introduction

Nowadays English is no more the patrimony of the Anglo Saxons, in fact it has emerged as a universal public property. Apart from being only means of communication between people, it has been deliberately taken up by writers as a medium of creative writing. Indian English writers have also gained mastery in using this language to articulate the deviations of an individual's consciousness. Works of Indian English writers are extremely Indian in both theme and spirit which have given a new shape and vision to English Literature. And not to forget that feminism too has added a notable trade in modern-day Indian-English writings.

Among many genres of Indian writing, one is Dalit literature. This genre of literature was ignored for a long time and not considered seriously in the mainstream literary genres.But now Dalit literature has been well acknowledged and can be seen as the nationalist movement in creating castes, tribes and the voiceless crushed by the voiced. It focuses on the lives, experiences, and struggles of the Dalit community. Out of many literary trends that emerged, Dalit literature is one of the most significant one as it states the impoverished untouchables of post-independence India.'Dalit' is actually a Sanskrit word which means downtrodden, broken or oppressedbutin India, with the change in people's perspective, the actual meaning lost its significance and got to be understood as to be 'outside the varna system', and thus these 'Dalits' are considered as'untouchables'.In simple terms it can be understood as the battle of 'untouchables' to be accepted by society as a whole since centuries, has emerged as a term called 'Dalit identity'. The term was initially used by Jyotirao Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, two prominent personalities who played a vital role in the development of Dalit literature. This community has faced caste-based oppression and discrimination for centuries. With the emergence of Dalit literature,

a new wave has emerged which is undoubtedly adding a new depth to understanding everyday life and society.

Women writers are being seen paying attention to women's experiences which is evident in their fictions and biographies. The situation for the relegation and subordination of women existence can be discovered from the narratives of women's lifestyles in their works. Instead of obedient, docile, and inert women, we discover insistent and hostile women characters in the writings of current Indian-English female writers.

The present proposed research titled "Re-examining Dalit Feminism in the Writings of Yashica Dutt, Sujatha Gidla and Bama" studies the feminist voices in the select autobiographies. It would highlight women's relegation, sufferings and their struggle for self. Dalit woman's experiences are different from any other caste women especially that of upper caste woman in Indian context. If we talk about struggle and caste discrimination amongst Dalits, it is women who face the worst kind of violence. Thus, no other genre can help visualise such diverse situation of Dalit women than in the life-writings of Dalit writers itself.

State of Art

This research aims to contribute to the existing knowledge of feminist flippant theory in the writings of Bama, Sujatha Gidla and Yashica Dutt from the Dalit feminist perspective and postmodernist theories. The study will include feminist retellings of these subordinated and marginalised women characters from the point of view of gender experience, space assigned to women and the concept of subservient study of particular characters. It would also analyse the textual features and power relations in the text. Further, this research aims to establish a comparative study between the writings of above-mentioned writers contributing to Dalit literature.

Literature Review

The study will analyse, synthesize and critically evaluate the primary sources as well as the secondary sources. There are several secondary sources available in the field of relevant study and various researcher's work in the field of Dalit autobiography. Books like J.H. Hutton's Caste in India (1969), Raj Kumar's Dalit Literature and Criticism (2019), Trilok Sharma's Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives (2011), deal with several questions and issues which may not only help in understanding Dalit voices in literature but also describe place of women in the social, economic and cultural factors.

The research seeks to study the experiences of women and also their social, cultural and gendered structural similarities and variations.

Problems to be investigated

The aim of the present research is to explore feminist voices in the select Dalit autobiographies. This research aims to closely study the primary sources with their secondary and tertiary sources to derive the proposed aims. The primary sources include selected autobiographies of Dalit women: Sujatha Gidla's*Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*, Yashika Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India's Caste System* and Bama's *Karukku.*

Thus, it provides a broad base to work upon, not just by deriving similarities between the cultures and characters but also their experiences. Keeping in mindthe works mentioned above, this research proposes to answer the following questions:

- How is it an essential theoretical tool for feminist and postmodernist analysis?
- How is the idea of power structure revised in the select life-writings?
- How has the gender stereotype been prominent in the select life-writings?
- How textual discourse operates within the select life-writings?
- How is the concept of marginalised voices reverted in the select life-writings?
- How Dalit women doubly suffer for being Dalit and women?

Aims and Objectives of Research

The aims and objectives of proposed research are as follows:

- To provide theoretical as well as contextual background to understand the marginalized identity of Dalit women.
- To appreciate resistance of Dalit women to the existing institutions and norms of society.
- To analyse Dalit women's subjugation, oppression and discrimination.
- To analyse the connection of caste and gender in the life of Dalit women to present-day society in particular and the world in general.
- To study the similarities and differences between these women characters to gather evidence on how women divided by culture and caste share a similar set of issues and to what extent a society controls and restricts them.
- To trace out the cultural shock which goes against the existing moral/cultural values of the society.
- To explore the issues of sexism, casteism, violence, abuse, and trauma.
- To focus on broadening the concept of feminism and tracing out some features of postmodernism like inconsistency, contradiction and multifacedness of truth.
- To study the harassment of Dalit women by the caste people.
- To bring out the feministic approach

Research Hypothesis

The present study seeks to hypothesize that Dalit women experience a unique and intensified form of oppression that is shaped by the intersection of caste, class, and gender. Despite facing multiple forms of oppression, Dalit women exercise agency and resistance in various ways, including through collective action, cultural expression, and everyday acts of defiance. The research work is an attempt to find out that education is a key factor

in empowering Dalit women, enabling them to challenge dominant narratives, assert their rights, and build collective power. Dalit women are reclaiming and redefining their identities, challenging dominant narratives and asserting their own voices, experiences, and perspectives. The research work will analyse the existing policies and laws that need to adequately address the unique experiences and challenges faced by Dalit women, highlighting the necessity for more inclusive interventions.

Research Methodology

The present research is to be done under the school of humanities and is qualitative in nature. The research is a study of feminist voices in select Dalit life-writings. It uses textual descriptive method of analysis. This study works to tell the lived experiences of the narrators, the ever-existing issues that are relatable today. Thus, it will be a kind of descriptive, exploratory, and interpretative in nature. It will adopt the MLA 9 formatting of citations and referencing.

Sources of Data and Tools to be used

The proposed study is qualitative in nature. Hence the tools to be used are books, journals, scholarly articles, excerpts from interviews, and the internet. A close reading and analysis of the author's works as primary sources along with the secondary sources will be done to critically analyse in compliance to the topic of the study. The experiences of the writers in different time period will open and lead a new path for further investigation that can advance this research.

Plan of the work

It is envisaged to divide the thesis into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter 3: Feminist Voice in Sujatha Gidla's*Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India,*

Chapter 4:Feminist Voice in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India's Caste System*

Chapter 5: Feminist Voice in Bama's *Karukku*

Chapter 6: Analysing Cross-cultural Comparative Study of theCentralCharacters

Chapter 7:Conclusion

Select Bibliography

Chapter 1: Introduction

The introduction of this research will discuss how the authors' works impact the society through their experiences. For a brief introduction to the authors of selected writings, let us start with Sujatha Gidla, an Indian-American author. She is no more an unfamiliar name who has contributed in this genre of writing. She lives in New York and works as a conductor on the New York City Subway. Gidla is known for her book *Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*. She was born in Andhra Pradesh, India and moved to the United States in 1990, when she was 26 years old. Her writing has appeared in *The Oxford India Anthology of Telugu Dalit Writing*. Sujatha Gidla was raised in the Christian dalit family, in Kakinada, a small town in present-day Andhra Pradesh. Her great grandparents accepted Christianity during Colonial rule after they heard the Gospel propagated by Canadian Baptist missionaries in the town. Sujatha's grandparents were also educated at one such institution run by the missionaries in Kakianda, the aim of which was heralding development in society.Prasanna Rao, Gidla's grandfather, studied in a school set up by the Canadian missionaries.Gidla's parents were also college lecturers.

Ants Among Elephants is Gidla's first book and was published in 2017. It is a family memoir that accounts the life of her uncle, KG Satyamurty, a Maoist leader who is also known as the founder of a left-wing militant organization called the People's War Group (PWG). The book also has the descriptionof the personal history of her mother Manjula's life, both of which are juxtaposed against the peasant revolt and the formation of a new state in newly independent India. Gidla classifies the book under the genre of 'literary nonfiction'.

The next author is Yashica Dutt, born in a Valmiki Hindu (Dalit) family in Ajmer, Rajasthan on 5 February 1986. She completed her graduation in B.Sc. from St. Stephen's College, Delhi in 2007. Yashica completed her Master's degree in Arts and Culture Journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism in 2015.

Yashica Dutt or can say Yashica Dutt Nidaniya is an Indian writer and freelance journalist who has written on topics including fashion, gender, identity, culture and caste. Following the response to her 2016 blog post, ‘Today, I’m coming out as Dalit’, Dutt published "Documents of Dalit Discrimination" on Tumblr and the book *Coming Out as Dalit*, which received a Sahitya Akademi award.

Yashica's book *Coming Out as Dalit* is her memoir about growing up in a Dalit family. She describes through her book the reasons of pretending to be of another caste that too an upper caste and also how she felt constrained to hide her caste. She was throughout terrified of her true identity being found out. The book details her journey of coming to terms with her true identity. It can be said that the book is woven with her personal experiences. She received the Sahitya Akademi Yuva Puraskar for the book in the English category for the year 2020.

The final author of study is Bama who was born in 1958 as Faustina Mary Fatima Rani in a Roman Catholic family belonging to the Paraiyar community from Puthupatti in

the then Madras State. 'Bama' is her pen name which she kept later. Her mother was namedSebasthiamma and her father Susairaj. Her father was employed in the Indian Army. Her brother, Raj Gauthaman is a famous Dalit writer. Bama's ancestors were from the Dalit community and worked as agricultural labourers. It was Bama's grandfather who had converted from Hinduism to Christianity. Bama had her early education in her village. Her early literary influences include Tamil writers like Jayakantan, Akhilan, Mani, and Parthasarthy. In college, she read and enjoyed Kahlil Gibran and Rabindranath Tagore. After her graduation, she became a school teacher for very poor girls, following which she served as a nun for seven years. She chose to take the holy orders to escape caste-based discrimination.

Karukku is Bama's autobiographical novel which accounts the joys and sorrows experienced by Dalit Christian women in Tamil. *Karukku* is an autobiography that interprets Bama's life, from her childhood to her early adult life as a nun, and beyond. The book was originally written by her in Tamil in 1992 and translated into the English version by Lakshmi Holmstrom in 2000. *Karukku* is one of the first autobiographies of a Dalit woman written in Tamil.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Among Dalits, it is women who face the worst kind of violence. They are gendered, sexualized and treated as both polluted and sexually available for the men of the dominant caste under the cloak of religious sanctions. Dalit women face patriarchy at home and the burden of patriarchy with caste outside. None Dalit movement or the women's movement in India has opened up and accepted the issues of Dalit women.

In the 1980s and 1990s Dalit women claimed their issues and their own movement to fight patriarchy outside and within their households. The movement marked their separate identity outside the category of women and Dalit. Gradually they showed their

presence in the political sphere too. Dalit women's autobiographies are opening up issues faced by them and bringing in front of the world which remained close to their hearts. Sharmila Rege calls autobiographies of Dalit women as testimonies. It also emphasizes their faith in justice and transformation in society in the conditions of Dalits and the caste system.

There are several secondary sources available in the field of relevant study. Various researchers work in the field of Dalit autobiography. J.H. Hutton's Caste in India (1969) gives critical study and examines the origin of caste system in Indian society.

Raj Kumar's Dalit Literature and Criticism (2019), is an attempt to write and develop a critical literary history and theory of Dalit literature. The book deals with several questions and issues which may help in understanding Dalit voices in literature.

Trilok Sharma's Dalit Women: Issues and Perspectives (2011), describes place of women in the social, economic and cultural factors.

Chapter 3:Feminist Voice in Sujatha Gidla's*Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India*

This chapter will discuss Sujatha Gidla and the interconnected nature of tyranny that a lower-middle-class Dalit woman faces during growing up in rural India. On the one hand, it will thoroughly explore the systematic enormity and doggedness prevalent in the Indian social structure, specifically focusing on the caste system. On the other, it will discuss about her family members and their stories which will present a comprehensive study analyse on how personal decisions and environmental constraints determine identity in the context of extensive societal hierarchy.

Sujatha Gidla's*Ants Among Elephants: An Untouchable Family and the Making of Modern India* (2017), talks about her family's struggle to overcome poverty, caste oppression, social ostracism and territorial stratification in the name of caste. It critiques

the modernist agenda of political parties and emergence of Maoist activities of those who are tagged as threat to national security and integrity.

Chapter 4: Feminist Voice in Yashica Dutt's *Coming Out as Dalit: A Memoir of Surviving India's Caste System*

This chapter will analyse the theme of Yashica Dutt's memoir andespecially the situations that she comes across.In *Coming Out as Dalit*, Dutt depicts the debilitating burden of living with the secret of hiding her identity and also how terrified she had been of being found out. She not only talks about the reason behind hiding her identity but also talks about the tremendous feeling of empowerment she experienced when she finally stood up for herself and her community.

Though the book is a personal memoir, it is also a narrative of the Dalits. While writing about her journey of coming to terms with the fake identity, she takes us through the history of the Dalit movement. The book gives an account of the consequences of her community's lack of access to education and culture, the need for reservation,lack of Dalit voices in mainstream media, Dalit women's movements and their ongoing contributions.

This study will analyse how readers may use such books to find an answer for crucial questions about caste and privilege. Woven from personal experiences as well as that of other Dalits, this book forces us to confront the injustices of caste and also serves as a call to action.

Chapter 5: Feminist Voice in Bama's *Karukku*

Bama's autobiography, Karukku, gives an account of her detailed life story andalso her community. Through the book Bama exposes the hidden casteism in South Indian village and Church. It is a critique of Indian society, its educational system, the bureaucracy and the church space that claims to believe in egalitarian values of

Christianity but practice inequalities in the name of caste. It also exposes the caste and class complicity in post-independence India.

This study proposes a female's quest for identity and social acceptance but also would be an example to the resilience and resistance of Dalit women in India. It will analyse how readers may use such books to find an answer for crucial questions about challenging oppressive structures and promoting social justice and equality.

Chapter 6: Analysing Cross-cultural Comparative Study of the Central Characters

This chapter will explore the theoretical cross-cultural study in detail. This chapter will discuss the social identification of the protagonists that Yashica Dutt, Sujatha Gidla and Bama have constructed in their works. It will also discuss the idea of social and cultural alienation explored in the books. These areas will be discussed within the counter-hagemony, subaltern, feminist and postmodernist theories.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

The last chapter will summarise the research and conclude the point of view from the researcher. This study will emphasise different perspectives of Dalit female writers Sujatha Gidla, Yashica Dutt and Bama. In the selected writings of these writers the economical, political, religious and cultural status of the depicted society will be studied and explored. These writings explore the characters' interpersonal relationships and also how this change or development help them survive the social distortion. Through these selected writings, personal experiences based on time and place, would also be explored. This study will analyse how readers may use such write-ups as toolsforunderstanding the feelings as well as the traumatic condition of Dalit people especially Dalit females in society which further can be useful while reacting and behaving with them.

Relevance to the Present-Day Problem and Contribution to the Present Knowledge

The problem of Dalits persists in society. This study analyses how condition of Dalits is portrayed in autobiographical works and how these portrayals reflect cultural attitude, beliefs, and fears.

Scope for Research in Future

The present world has brought such issues which are new and different from the ancient ones, nevertheless the underlying problems remain more or less the same. Issue of Dalit women is still an area to understand and resolve. Hence, this research is quite relevant to the present times and tiles the way for future scholarship where the researchers can build on the current study by taking feministic issues and capsizing the traditional social order to examine contemporary societal problems.

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